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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a 1989 survey administered to superintendents of the 24 South Carolina school districts considered to be 100% rural. The purpose of the survey was to identify the most critical problems or concerns facing rural school districts in the 1990s. The superintendents were asked to rate 28 different items as being a critical problem or concern, somewhat of a problem or concern, or not a problem or concern. The survey was completed by 19, or 79 percent, of the administrators. Most superintendents rated most items either somewhat of a problem or critical problem or concern. The most critical problems or concerns were: (1) low funding for capital improvements; (2) increasing costs of fringe benefits; (3) increasing demands of federal and state programs; (4) funding; and (5) high costs of maintenance of facilities; and (6) recruitment of minority teachers. When asked if the problems could be solved, 68 percent of the superintendents answered in the affirmative. The survey indicated that most superintendents agreed that increased state-level funding and support for education has to be part of the solution if significant improvements are going to be realized by South Carolina's 100% rural school districts. (ALL)

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WHAT DO SUPERINTENDENTS SAY ARE THE MOST CRITICAL PROBLEMS FACING THE 100% RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF S.C.?

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WHAT DO SUPERINTENDENTS SAY ARE THE MOST CRITICAL PROBLEMS FACING THE 100% RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF S.C.?

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In September, 1989, a survey was administered to superintendents of the twenty-four one hundred percent (100%) rural school districts in South Carolina for the purpose of identifying the most critical problems or concerns facing rural school districts in the 1990's and beyond. The results of the survey were both interesting and significant, with "Low Funding for Capital Improvements" identified as the most critical problem facing rural school districts.

Methodology

A one page survey instrument was developed for the purpose of collecting data regarding superintendents' perceptions of the most critical problems or concerns facing the rural school districts of South Carolina. The survey instrument contained two parts. Part I asked the superintendent to rate twenty-eight different items on a scale of one to three (one = critical problem or concern; two = somewhat of a problem or concern; or three = not a problem or concern). There was

also a twenty-ninth item which was labeled "other".

The second part of the instrument was made up of questions which required open-ended responses. The first question in Part Two asked the superintendent to briefly summarize the three most critical problems facing his particular school district. The second question asked the superintendent if the problems could be solved. If the superintendent responded "yes", then he was also asked to briefly explain how the problems could best be solved at the State and/or local levels.

The survey instrument was mailed to the twenty-four superintendents of the State's one hundred percent (100%) rural school districts. The survey was completed and returned by a total of nineteen superintendents or seventy-nine percent (79%) of the superintendents surveyed.

Findings

Most items were rated either "somewhat of a problem or concern" or "critical problem or concern" by most superintendents. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the superintendents rated "Low State Funding for Capital Improvements" as a "critical problem or concern". Also, fourteen of the nineteen superintendents (74%) considered "Increasing Costs

of Fringe Benefits" to be a critical problem. Three items ("Recruitment of Minority Teachers", "Funding", and "Increasing Demands of State and Federal Programs - programs required, limited/no funds provided") were rated "critical problem or concern" by sixty-eight percent (68%) of the superintendents. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the superintendents rated "Inadequate Housing" and "High Costs of Maintenance of School Facilities" as "critical problem or concern". Also, fifty-eight percent (58%) of the superintendents rated "Low Tax Base" and "School Board Has No Fiscal Authority" as "critical". The only item that did not receive a rating of "critical" by at least one superintendent was item #3 - "Declining Minority Enrollment". This item received a rating of "not a problem or concern" by fifteen of the nineteen superintendents (80%). In addition, fourteen of the superintendents (74%) rated item #13 ("Few Professionals With Master's Degrees; Six Year Certificates; or Advanced Degrees") as "not a problem or concern". Also, eleven of the nineteen superintendents (58%) responded to item #12 ("High Teacher Turnover") with the rating of "not a problem or concern".

FIVE MOST CRITICAL PROBLEMS OR CONCERNS

"LOW FUNDING FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS" was identified as the

most critical problem facing rural school districts. The second most critical problem facing rural school districts was identified as "INCREASING COSTS OF FRINGE BENEFITS", followed by "INCREASING DEMANDS OF FEDERAL AND STATE PROGRAMS" as the third most critical problem. "FUNDING" was identified as the fourth most critical problem facing rural school districts, and "HIGH COSTS OF MAINTENANCE OF FACILITIES" and "RECRUITMENT OF MINORITY TEACHERS" tied for fifth place. The twenty-eight items and the ranking of each are displayed in Figure 1.

Responses to the open-ended items in Part II supported the findings of the numerical ratings. "Funding for Capital Improvements" again emerged as the most critical problem or concern, followed by "Increasing Costs of Fringe Benefits".

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

When asked if the problems could be solved, sixty-eight percent (68%) of the superintendents said, "yes". The responses indicated that most superintendents agree that "Increased State-Level Funding and Support for Education" has to be a part of the solution if significant improvements are going to be realized by South Carolina's twenty-four one hundred percent (100%) rural school districts. Also, the

Figure 1

ITEM RANKING
FOR EACH OF THE TWENTY-EIGHT GENERAL AREAS

RANKING	GENERAL AREA
1	Low State Funding for Capital Improvements
2	Increasing Costs of Fringe Benefits
3	Increasing Demands - State/Federal Programs
4	Funding
5,6	High Costs of Maintenance of Facilities
5,6	Recruitment of Minority Teachers
7	Housing
8	Low Tax Base
9	High Costs of Asbestos Removal
10	School Board Has No Fiscal Authority
11	Retention of Minority Teachers
12,13	Recruitment/Compensation - Adult Bus Drivers
12,13	Large % of Pop. 18 Yrs/Older - < H.S. Education
14	Small Central Office Staff
15,16,17	Low Per Pupil Expenditure
15,16,17	Breadth & Depth of Curriculum
15,16,17	Lg. No. of Single Parent Households
18,19	Declining Support for Public Education
18,19	High Teacher Turnover
20	School Board Has Limited Fiscal Authority
21,22,23	Teacher Salary Schedule @ State Minimum
21,22,23	Lg. No. Students Eligible - Free/Reduced Lunch
21,22,23	Low Student Enrollment
24	County Board of Education Approves Budget
25	Declining Non-Minority Enrollment
26	Declining Student Enrollment
27	Few Professionals With Master's/Advanced Degrees
28	Declining Minority Enrollment

Note: Items were rated on a scale of one to three ("one = critical problem or concern"; "two = somewhat of a problem or concern"; or "three = not a problem or concern"). The lower the mean rating, the more critical the problem or concern.

responses indicated that most superintendents tend to agree that the State's facilities needs and the overall problem of "Low State Funding for Capital Improvements" has to be addressed at the State level.

Other comments, suggestions, and possible solutions which were reflected in the open-ended responses include the following: "Adjust the EFA Formula to Compensate for Small Size"; "More Funds to Improve Salaries and Become Financially Competitive"; More Money to Hire Personnel"; "Increased Funding to Employ Central Office Support Staff"; "Creative Housing Endeavors and Inducements to Teachers Beyond Salary"; "More Concentrated Efforts at Industrial Development"; "Legislation Mandating Fiscal Independence"; "Special Programs and Initiatives to Provide Adult Education in Unique Ways to a Very Diverse Work Population"; "Continue to Promote the Need for Greater Adult Literacy"; "Increase Community-Business Support for Education"; and "Make Special Efforts to Encourage Minority Students to Become Teachers".

Conclusions

South Carolina continues to lead the nation in educational reform. The Education Improvement Act and Target 2000 have placed new and greater demands, and more stringent requirements on the public schools of South Carolina. Each piece

of legislation has mandated accountability in education. The result has been the emergence of new and more complex problems and a growing interest in, and concern for, rural education.

Today, the problems of the rural school districts are more complex than ever. Superintendents of these districts have a clear understanding of their problems; and more importantly, how the problems might best be solved at the State and/or local levels. "Low State Funding for Capital Improvements" is considered to be the most critical problem of the rural school districts, followed by "Increased Costs of Fringe Benefits". "Increased Demands of State and Federal Programs" ranks third among the most critical problems or concerns of the State's rural school districts. Although educational improvements are evident throughout the public school districts of South Carolina, there is still a lot of work to be done and many problems to be solved if the rural school districts are to survive the next decade of educational reform.